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ABSTRACT

A study focused on promotion/retention policies, retention rates, and the problems/objectives associated with their implementation. Thirty-three of the 43 members of the Council of the Great City Schools responded to a survey that measured three demographic characteristics: the percentage of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch; the percentage of students enrolled in the Education Consolidation Improvement Act Chapter 1 programs; and the percentage of sixth-graders scoring at or above norm in sixth-grade reading and mathematics. Findings focus on the variability of urban system retention rates; identifiable patterns of retention across grades in urban school districts; and the influence of summer school accessibility on retention rates. Appended are (1) a table of schools responding to the 1986-87 survey; (2) a table of grade-level retention rates; and (3) 13 bar graphs displaying the distribution of school system retention rates. (SI)

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THE NATION REACTS: A SURVEY OF PROMOTION/ RETENTION RATES IN 40 URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICTS

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THE NATION REACTS: A SURVEY OF PROMOTION/ RETENTION RATES IN 40 URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Background

The Directors of Research of the Council of the Great City Schools, a membership organization of urban school systems, conducted a study of retention/promotion rates in 1986-87. The study focused on promotion/retention policies, retention rates, and the problems/objectives associated with their implementation.

Twenty-seven member school systems responded to the study survey. Twenty-six of the twenty-seven school districts reported that they had a promotion/retention policy or a widely followed (80%) practice. The great majority of the districts had adopted the policy/procedure as a total initiative and only 15% reported that such a policy was required by state law. The respondents reported that promotion/retention decisions were based on Teacher Judgment (85%), as well as State mandated tests (73%), Local District tests (55%), Student Attendance (50%), as well as a variety of other factors. Mean grade level retention rates ranged from 22.0 percent at grade nine to 4.3 percent at grade five. (See Appendix 1.)

The uncredited authors of the 1987 survey report speculated that the high failure rates at grade nine were due to "guarding the passageway" to high school enrollment at grade ten. The report also notes the declining failure rates through the elementary grades as well as the dramatic increase at grade seven. Sixty percent of the responding districts reported that failure rates had risen during the recent past.

A follow-up survey of retention rates was approved for 1987-88 by the Directors of Research and Evaluation. This report will focus on three of the topics included in the 1987-88 survey:

1. What is the variability of urban system retention rates?
2. Are there identifiable patterns of retention across grades in urban school districts?
3. How are retention rates influenced by the accessibility of summer school?

Procedures:

The survey form was developed by the author with input from Bill Denton, Dallas Independent Schools; Paul Lemahieu, Pittsburgh Public Schools; and Sharon Johnson-Lewis, Detroit Public Schools. The survey was distributed in April, 1988, and a follow-up mailing was made to non-respondents in June, 1988. Responses received after August 1, 1988, were excluded from the results.

Three demographic characteristics were included on the survey: the percentage of students eligible for free and reduced price lunch; the percentage of students enrolled in ECIA Chapter 1 programs; and the percentage of sixth graders scoring at or above norm in reading and mathematics of the sixth grade. School district figures on each of these variables were converted to T-scores. These T-scores were then averaged to obtain a rough SES measure for each school district. Not all districts included data on all variables. In these cases the mean of the remaining variables was used.

The school districts were then grouped into five roughly equal sized groups based on the mean T-scores. Natural breaks in the distribution of scores were used, where possible, to increase group to group differences even though this resulted in varying numbers of systems within the groups.

Results

Thirty-three of the forty-three members of the Council of the Great City Schools responded to the survey. (See Appendix 1.) Four districts were unable to provide district level retention rates at any grade and the remaining twenty-nine districts provided data for from 4 to 13 grades. The specific grades reported by each district are listed in Appendix 2. Altogether, 29 districts responded with Elementary grade retention rates, 23 with 7-8 retention rates, and 19 with Senior High retention rates.

What Is the Variability of Urban System Retention Rates?

Mean retention rates by grade as well as by SES group are displayed in Table 1. The retention rates reported in the present study are lower than those reported in 1986-87 at every grade. (See Appendix 2.) The differences are not due to declines in failure rates in the systems included in the survey, but are due instead to the additional systems which responded to the 1987-88 survey.

The distribution of school system retention rates is displayed by grade in Appendix 3, Tables 1 - 13. A glance at the distributions shows that retention rates varied widely across urban systems at each grade. Average retention rates present only a part of the picture, and with the strongly skewed distributions at some grades, a potentially misleading one. The variability of retention rates within the SES groups was also quite wide. For example, two of the six highest SES systems reported above average retention rates while two of the nine lowest SES districts reported extremely low retention rates. The average K-6 retention rates for 25 school systems ranged from less than 1.0% to over 11%, average 7-8th grade rates from 0.1% to 19% and the average 9-12th grade rates from 1% to 36.5%.

MEAN FAILURE RATES OF
CITY SCHOOL SYSTEMS -
GROUPED BY SES AND GRADE

Table 1

	High SES				Low SES	
Grade	1 (N = 6)	2 (N = 5)	3 (N = 4)	4 (N = 5)	5 (N = 9)	Total Mean*
K	2.1	4.8	5.3	2.2	6.3	4.6
1	7.7	8.0	10.1	8.7	12.4	9.7
2	3.4	4.0	5.9	3.7	7.8	5.3
3	2.5	3.2	3.5	2.4	6.5	3.9
4	1.8	2.2	2.6	2.3	6.1	3.4
5	2.0	2.0	3.3	1.8	2.8	2.4
6	2.7	6.0	2.3	0.9	6.2	3.7
	(N = 6)	(N = 3)	(N = 4)	(N = 4)	(N = 6)	
7	7.3	9.0	7.3	8.2	14.7	9.6
8	4.3	8.0	4.5	6.2	12.1	7.2
	(N = 4)	(N = 2)	(N = 3)	(N = 4)	(N = 6)	
9	13.2	13.0	15.3	16.2	28.7	19.0
10	10.3	12.5	11.3	14.9	20.1	14.8
11	6.3	12.9	8.4	9.6	11.8	9.8
12	4.9	6.4	6.2	7.3	6.8	6.4
K-3	3.9	5.0	6.2	4.3	8.3	5.9
4-6	2.2	3.4	2.7	1.7	5.4	3.2
K-6	3.2	4.3	4.7	3.1	6.9	4.6
7-8	5.8	8.5	5.9	7.2	13.4	8.4
7-12	7.7	10.3	8.8	10.4	15.7	11.1
9-12	8.7	11.2	10.3	12.0	16.9	12.5
K-12	5.3	7.1	6.6	6.5	11.0	7.6

* Weighted Mean of Group Scores.

The pattern of retention rates by SES shows that the retention rates generally increased with declining SES. The relationship was erratic across the three middle SES groups, but quite clear between the extreme groups. In general, the retention rates in the lowest SES group were at least twice as large as those in the highest SES group. The six high SES schools (Group 1) reported that 34% of their students were eligible for free and reduced price lunches and that 64% of their 6th grade students scored at or above national norm on a standardized reading test. The nine low SES schools (Group 5) reported that 66% of their students were eligible for free and reduced price lunches and that 43% of their 6th grade students scored at or above norm on a standardized reading test.

Are There Identifiable Patterns of Retention Across Grades in Urban School Districts?

The high retention grades in the 1987-88 survey were the same as the high retention grades during the previous year: Grade 9 (19%), Grade 10 (14.8%), Grade 11 (9.8%), Grade 1 (9.7%), and Grade 7 (9.6%). Kindergarten retention rates which were not included in the earlier survey averaged 4.6% which placed this grade after first and second grade among the elementary grades. As noted in the earlier report retention rates tended to decline steadily from first to sixth grade across the elementary grades. The low SES schools tended to differ from the other groups at grades 3-6. Retention rates in these schools remained high across the intermediate grades.

Retention rates were significantly higher in grades 7 and 8 in all five SES groups. At these grades school systems tended to break out into two clusters. In the first one 7th and 8th grade retention rates were similar to those found in the elementary grades (0-6%). In the second cluster the retention rates were more similar to those in the secondary grades (8-20%). The low SES school systems were under-represented in the latter group although high retention systems were found in each of the other SES groups.

Four of the 19 school systems which reported K-12 retention rates showed very low retention rates at each of the three levels. These low retention systems were distributed across the SES groups (groups 1,3,4, and 5). In the higher SES groups 7-8th grade retention rates were of about the same magnitude as 9-12th grade retention rates. In lower SES systems, grades 9-12 retention rates were significantly higher than those in grades 7-8. Indeed the schools in the lowest SES group exhibited retention rates across levels that distinguished them from all of the other groups.

How are retention rates influenced by the accessibility of summer school?

One point raised in the discussions that led to the followup survey was the lack of clarity concerning precisely what the reported retention rates represented. It was pointed out that the retention rates could represent the gross number of students retained at the end of a school year (spring retention rate). In this case summer school could have a significant impact on the net retention rate going into the following school year (fall retention rate). The followup survey made an attempt to delineate between these two types of retention rates as well as get information on the likely effect of summer school programs on the overall impact of retention. Twenty-two of the 29 school systems which included grade-by-grade retention data reported spring results while the remaining seven systems reported fall results. Followup questions on the number of students participating in summer school programs were answered by only a handful of the respondents. Furthermore, inspection of the retention rates of the districts which included fall results showed that retention rates were not significantly lower than those reported for spring. For that reason both sets of results were combined in the data included in this report.

It is very likely that the retention rates reported from spring were over-estimates of the real impact of retention. It is also clear that most school districts did not update their retention data based on summer school participation and promotion. A truly accurate assessment of the impact of retention in urban school districts will not be possible until better data are collected at the local level.

An additional question on the survey asked whether the school system maintained records on the cumulative impact of retention. For example, would it be possible to look at the proportion of ninth graders who had been retained one, two, or three or more times. Again the responses indicated that very few school systems regularly produced data which would allow the analysis of the cumulative impact of retention.

Discussion

The data included in this report have a number of flaws as has been pointed out earlier. Large urban school systems tend to collect promotion/retention data at the end of the school year. Only seven of 29 school districts were able to give the percentage of students repeating a grade at the beginning of a school year. Twenty-four of the 29 school systems reporting grade-by-grade retention rates reported that they also operated summer schools designed to "remediate retention." However, only three systems provided data which delineated the effect of summer school promotion on overall retention rates. The grade-by-grade retention rates included in this report are no doubt higher than true retention rates by some unknown amount.

Promotion/retention policies and procedures for reporting retention rates are largely determined by the local school systems in this sample. It is not surprising therefore to find a great deal of variation in both retention guidelines and retention accounting procedures. Indeed the topic of retention rates is not important enough in 40% of the districts for the school systems to even collect the data. At the secondary grades where retention is usually defined in terms of Carnegie Units or some other form of credit, central monitoring of local school retention rates was not available in 10 of 29 systems. Followup questions showed that most school systems did not collect information on age-grade distributions or on the cumulative effects of failure which would be more useful for educational decision making than ordinary retention rates.

Clear cut retention patterns did not emerge in this study. Some school districts showed extremely low retention rates across all grade levels which appeared to be unrelated to their demographic characteristics. Other school systems showed extremely low elementary level retention rates paired with very high secondary retention rates. There was some indication that in higher SES school systems secondary retention tends to be taken care of early and remains well below average in grades 9 through 12. In the lowest SES districts there was a strong tendency for already high retention rates in grades 7 and 8 to lead to even higher ones in grades 9-12. Finally, the extremely large differences in achievement, free lunch eligibility and retention rates across the systems in this sample provide a warning to anyone using the term, "large urban school system" that it does not describe fact as opposed to myth.

APPENDIX I

Council of The Great City
Schools Responding to
1986-87 Retention Survey

Districts Responding To The Survey	Retention Rates Reported For:	All Data For Spring Term Unless Noted
Albuquerque Public Schools	K-8	
Atlanta Public Schools	K-12	
Baltimore City Schools	K-12	
Buffalo Public Schools	--	
Chicago Public Schools	K-12	
Cincinnati Public Schools	1-12	
Columbus Public Schools	1-5	Fall Data
Dade County Public Schools	K-12	Fall Data
Dallas Independent Schools	K-12	Fall Data
Denver Public Schools	K-8	
Detroit Public Schools	K-12	
Fresno Unified School District	K-6	
Indianapolis Public Schools	K-6	
Long Beach Unified School District	--	
Los Angeles Unified School District	K-12	
Milwaukee Public Schools	--	
Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools	1-12	
Minneapolis Public Schools Special School District #1	K-8	Fall Data
New Orleans Parish School Board	1-12	
New York City Public Schools	K-2, 4	
Norfolk Public Schools	K-12	
Oakland Unified School District	K-6	
Pittsburgh Public Schools	K-12	Fall Data
Portland Public Schools	K-5	
Rochester City Schools	1-12	Fall Data
St. Louis Public Schools	K-12	Fall Data
St. Paul Public Schools	K-12	
San Diego Unified School District	--	
San Francisco Unified School District	K-12	
Toledo Public Schools	K-8	
Tucson Unified School District	K-8	
Tulsa Public Schools	K-12	
Wake County Public School System	K, K-12	

APPENDIX 2

Grade Level Retention Rates Reported In The 1986-87 Retention Survey

1986 Council
Grade Level Retention*

1	10.9	7	12.1
2	7.5	8	10.2
3	6.4	9	22.0
4	5.7	10	15.6
5	4.3	11	10.5
6	4.8	12	6.6

***Based on responses from 26 school districts**

1-12 retention Rates	10
K-8 retention rates	7
1-6 retention rates	1
Broken grades	1
No rates	8

APPENDIX 3

Distribution of School
System Retention Rates
By Grades

TABLE 1

KINDERGARTEN RETENTION RATES

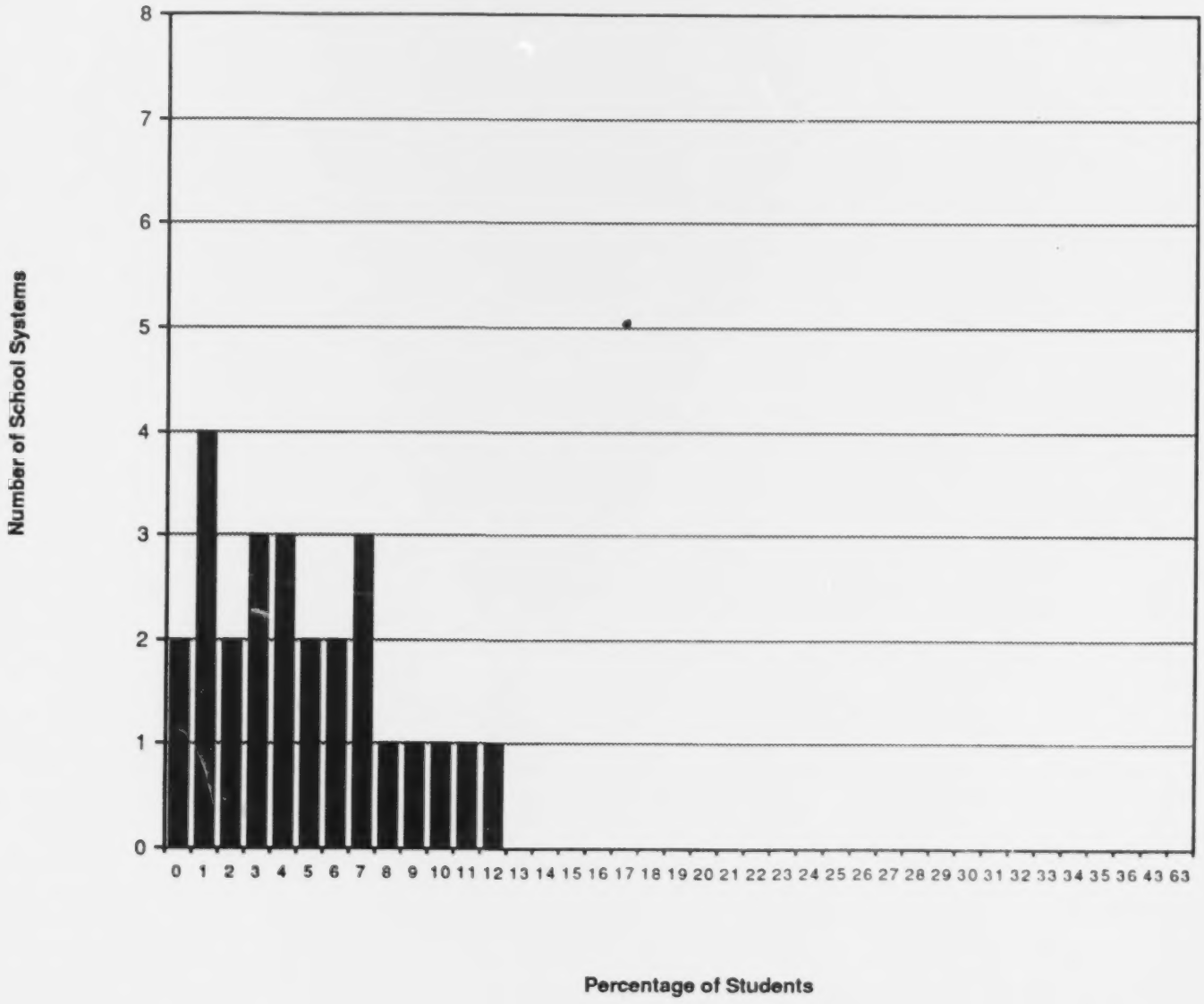

TABLE 2

GRADE 1 RETENTION RATES

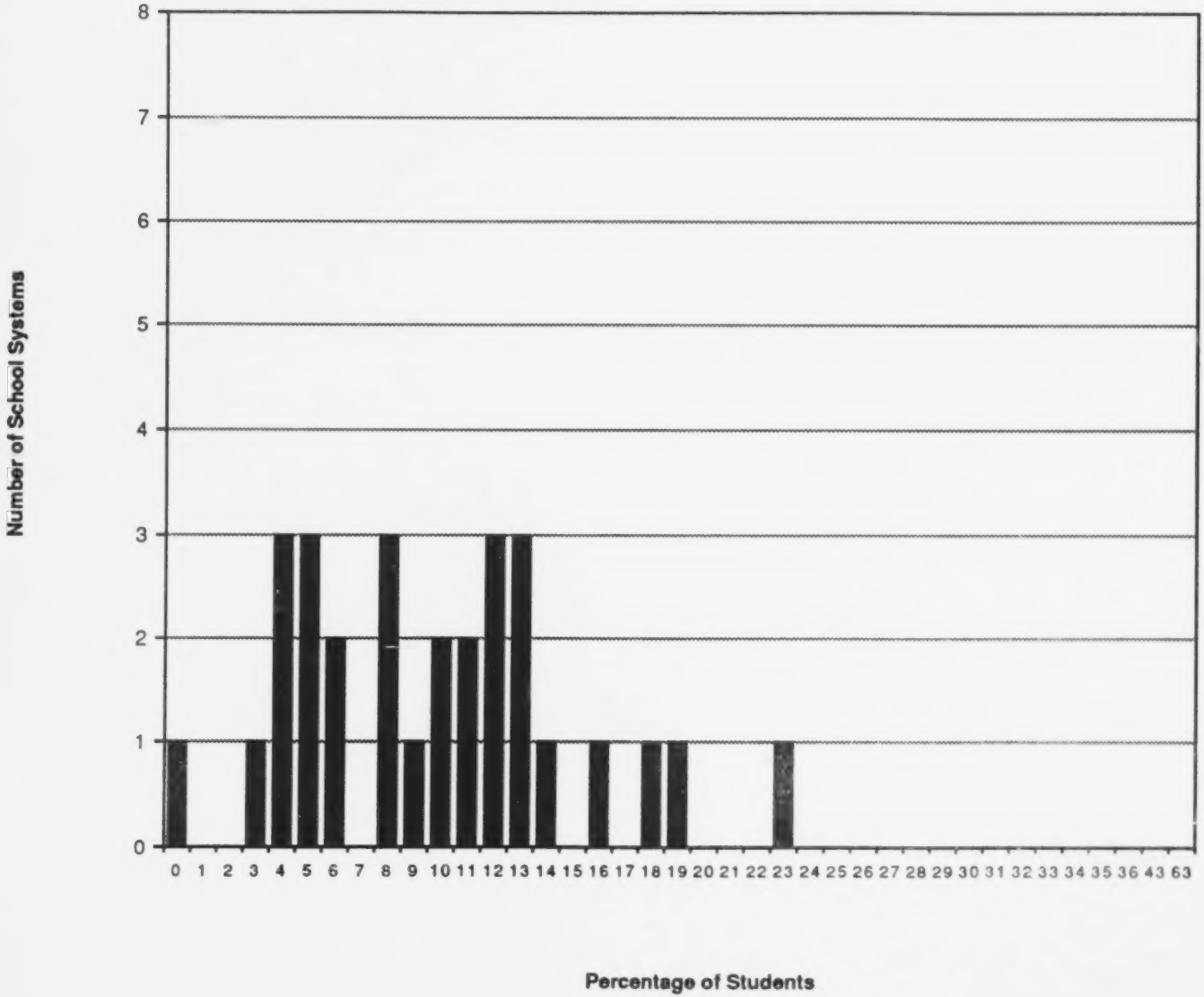

TABLE 3

GRADE 2 RETENTION RATES

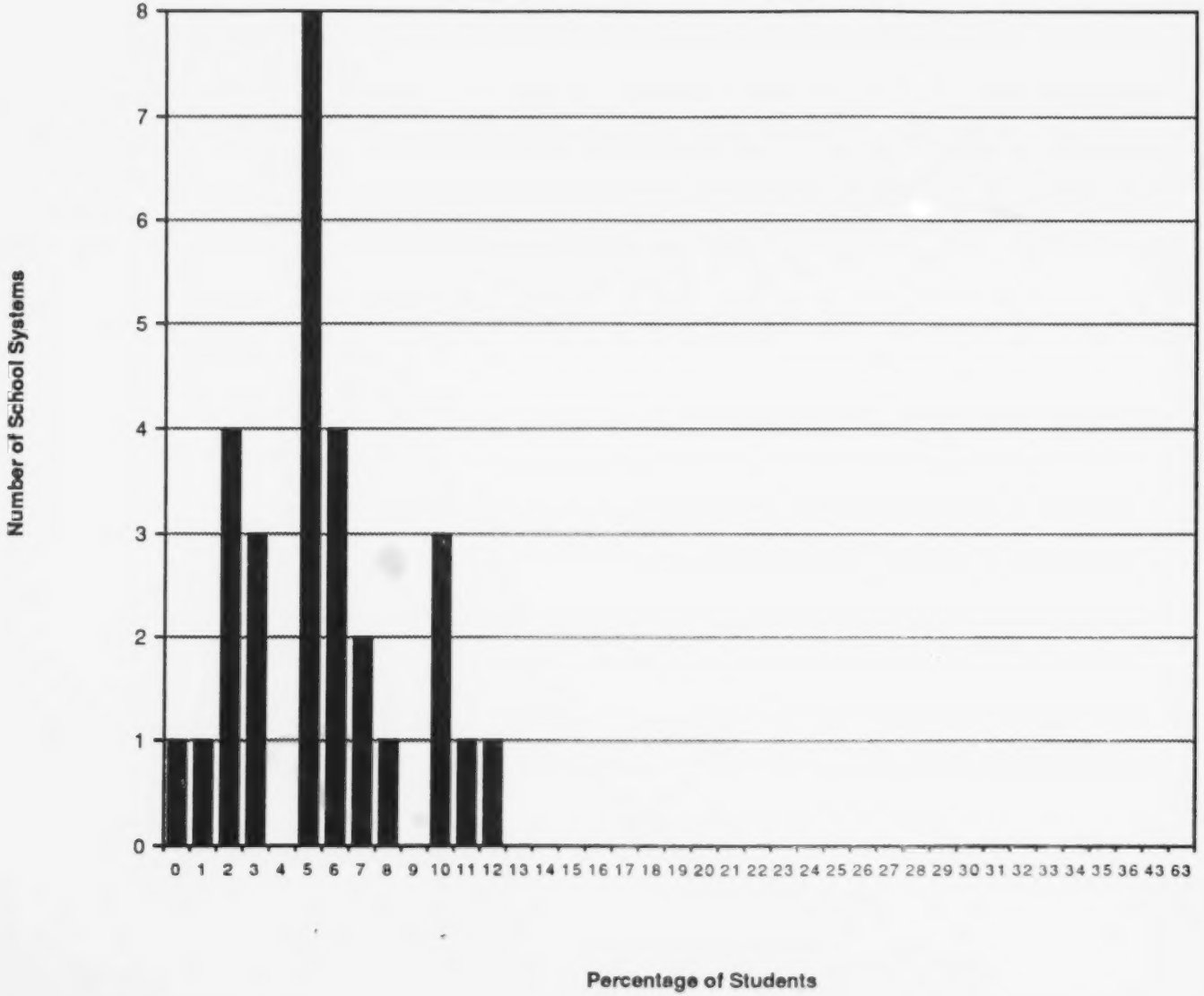

TABLE 4

GRADE 3 RETENTION RATES

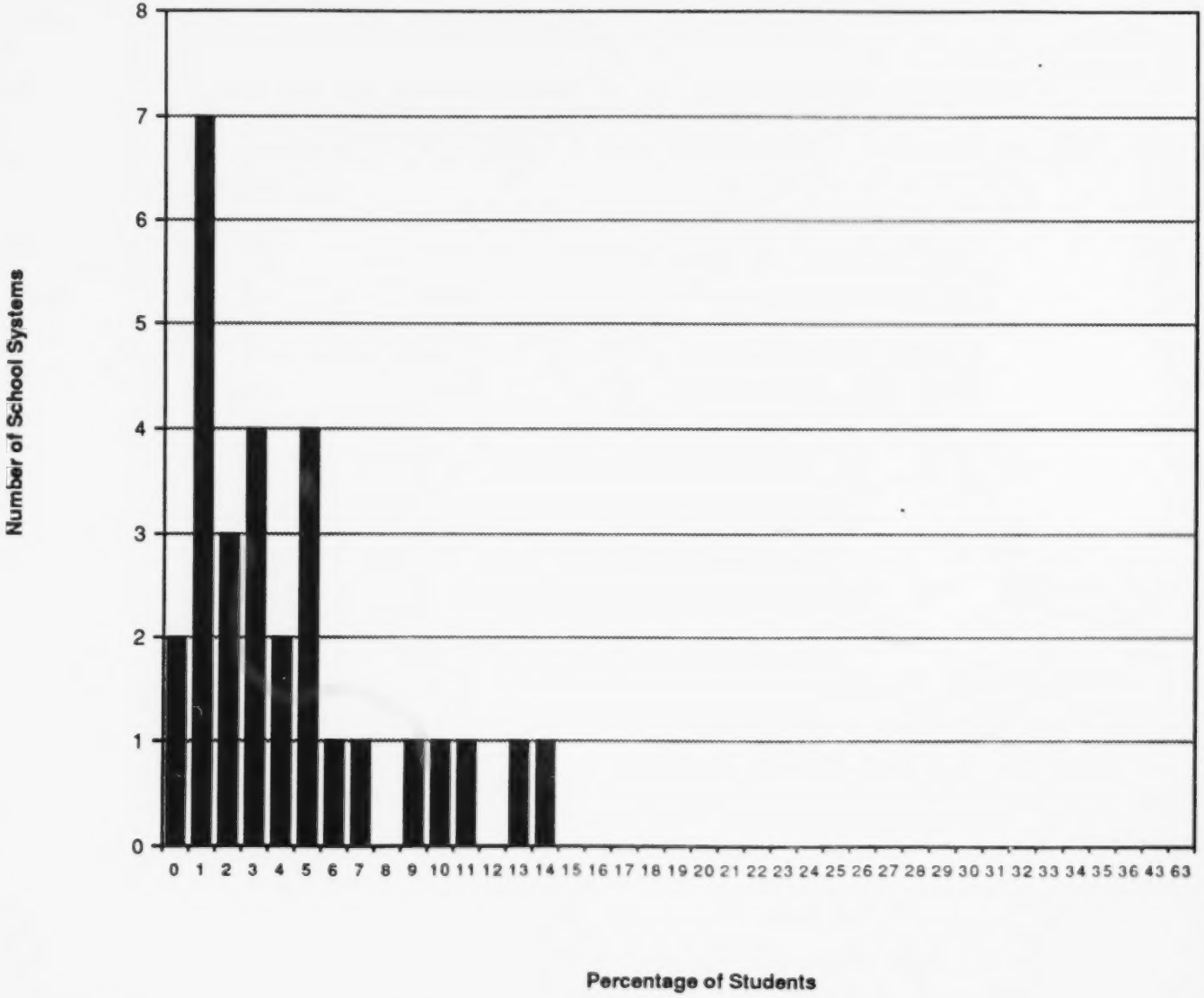

TABLE 5

GRADE 4 RETENTION RATES

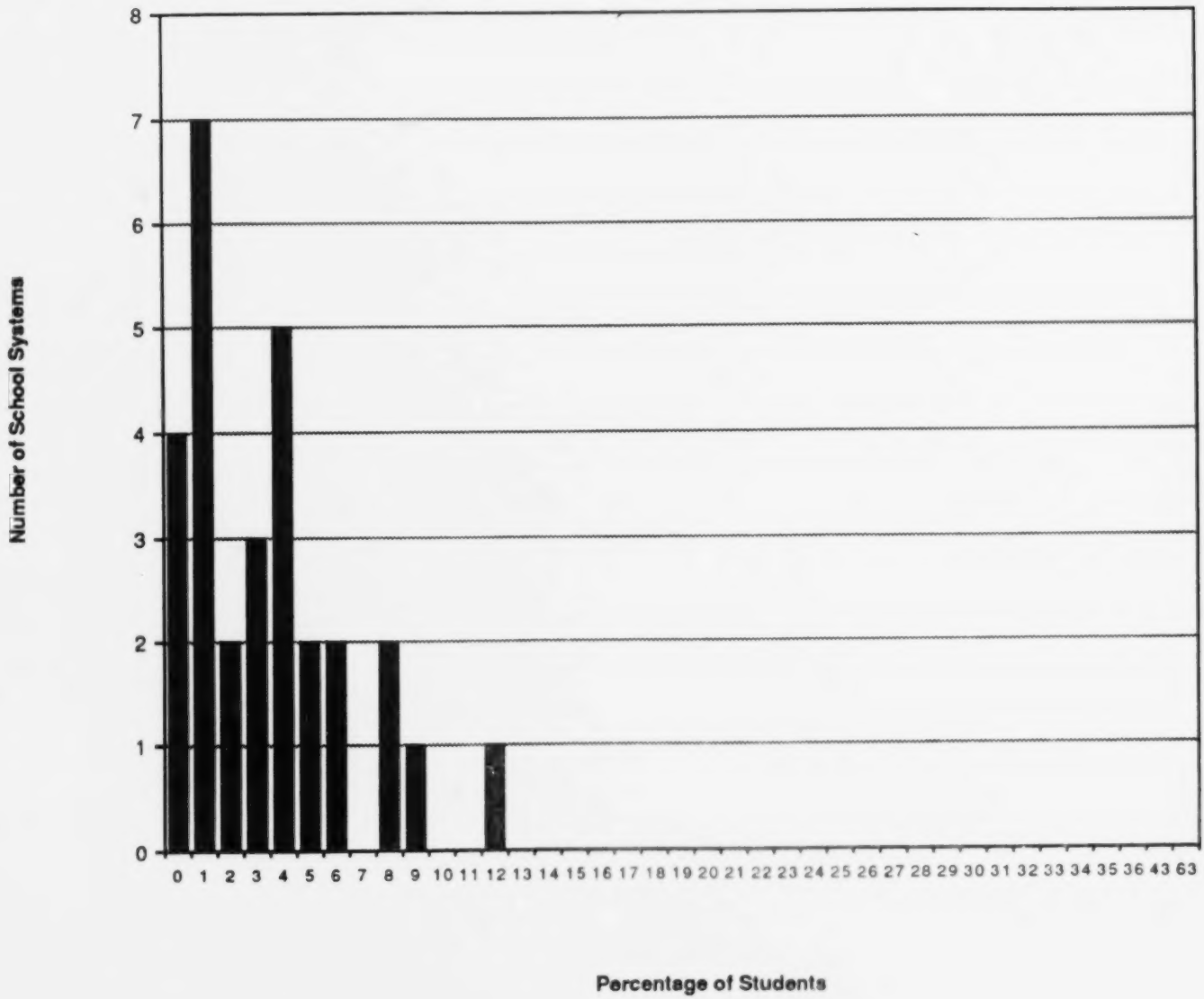

TABLE 6

GRADE 5 RETENTION RATES

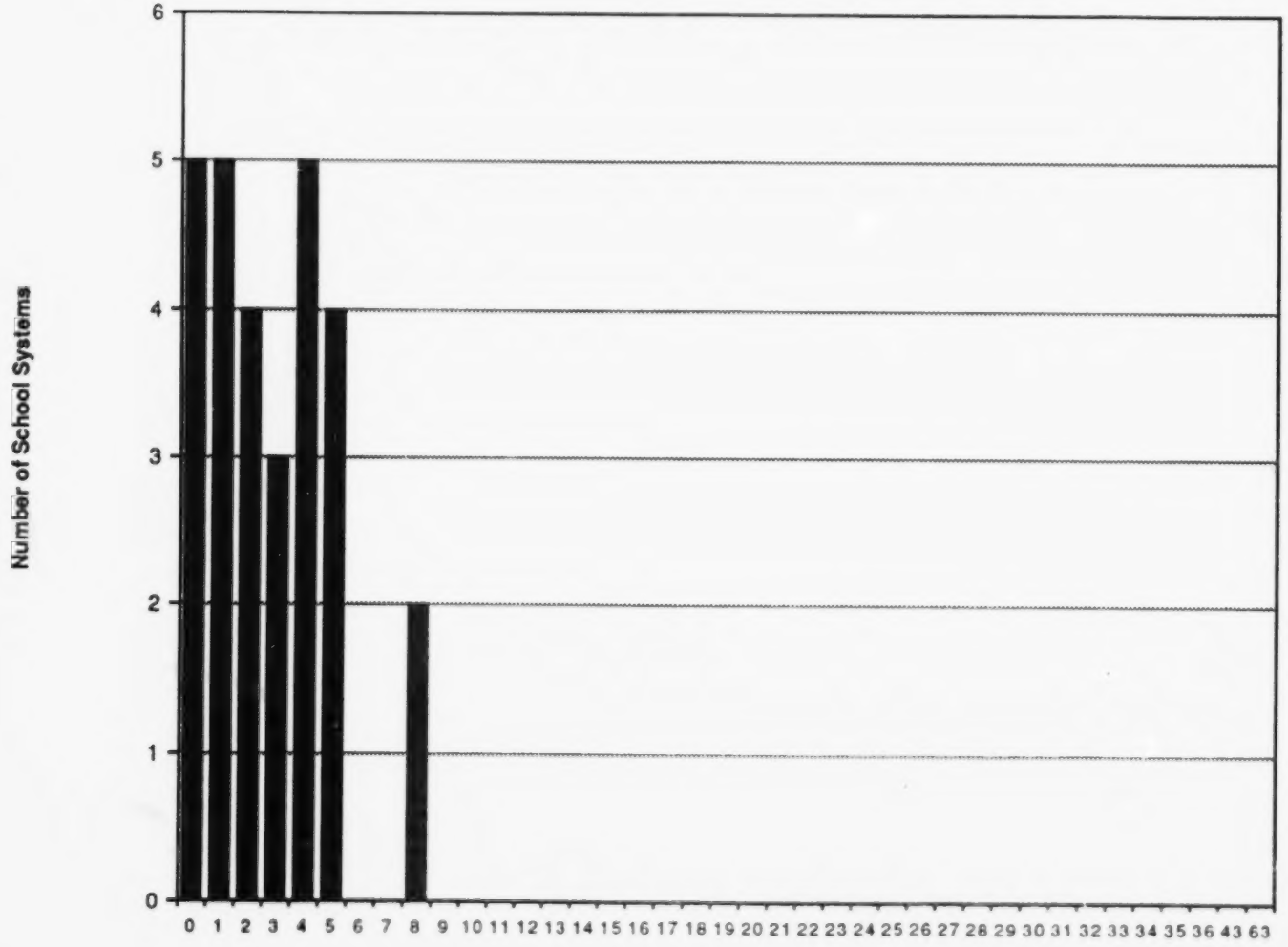

TABLE 7

GRADE 6 RETENTION RATES

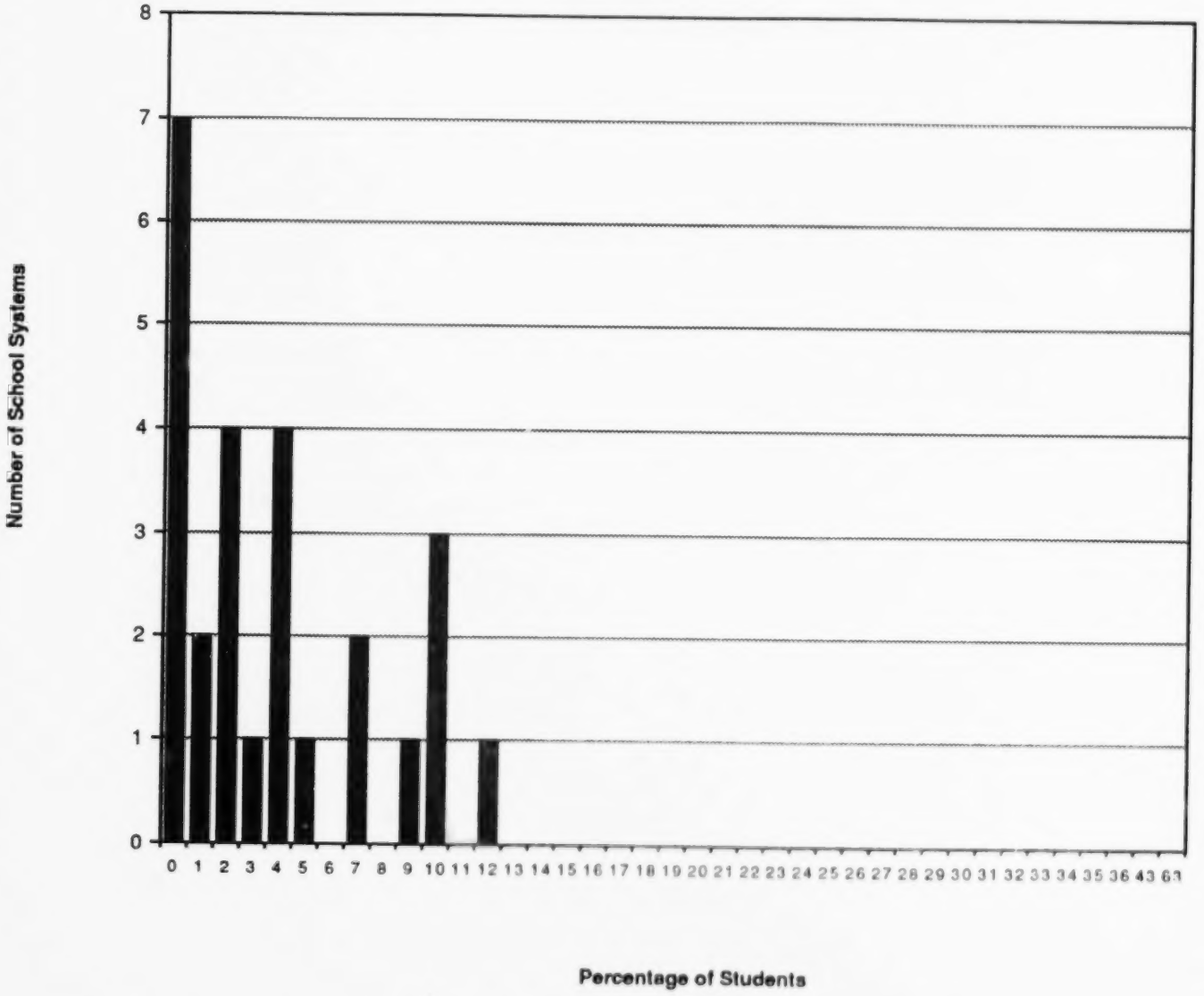

TABLE 8

GRADE 7 RETENTION RATES

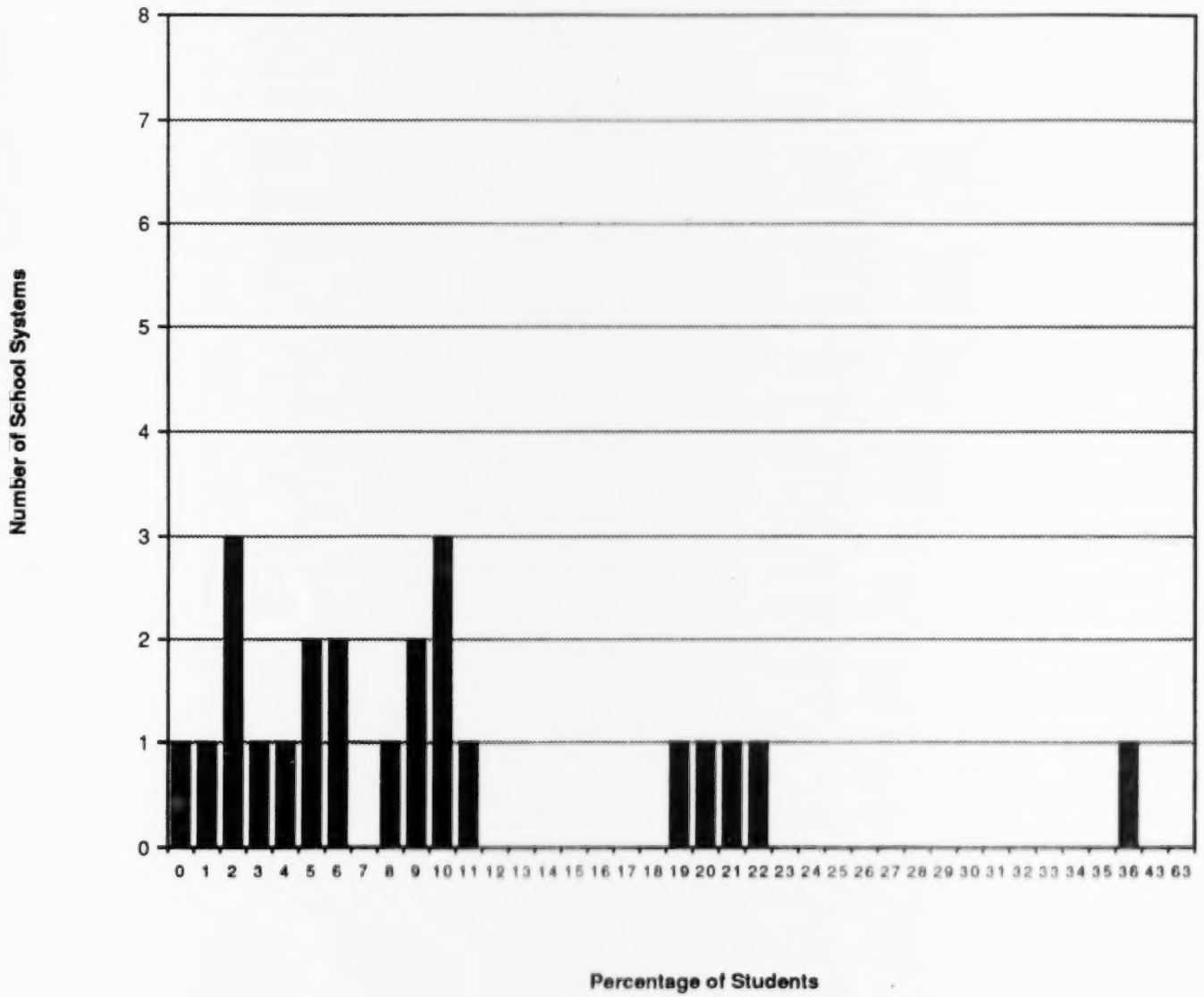

TABLE 9

GRADE 8 RETENTION RATES

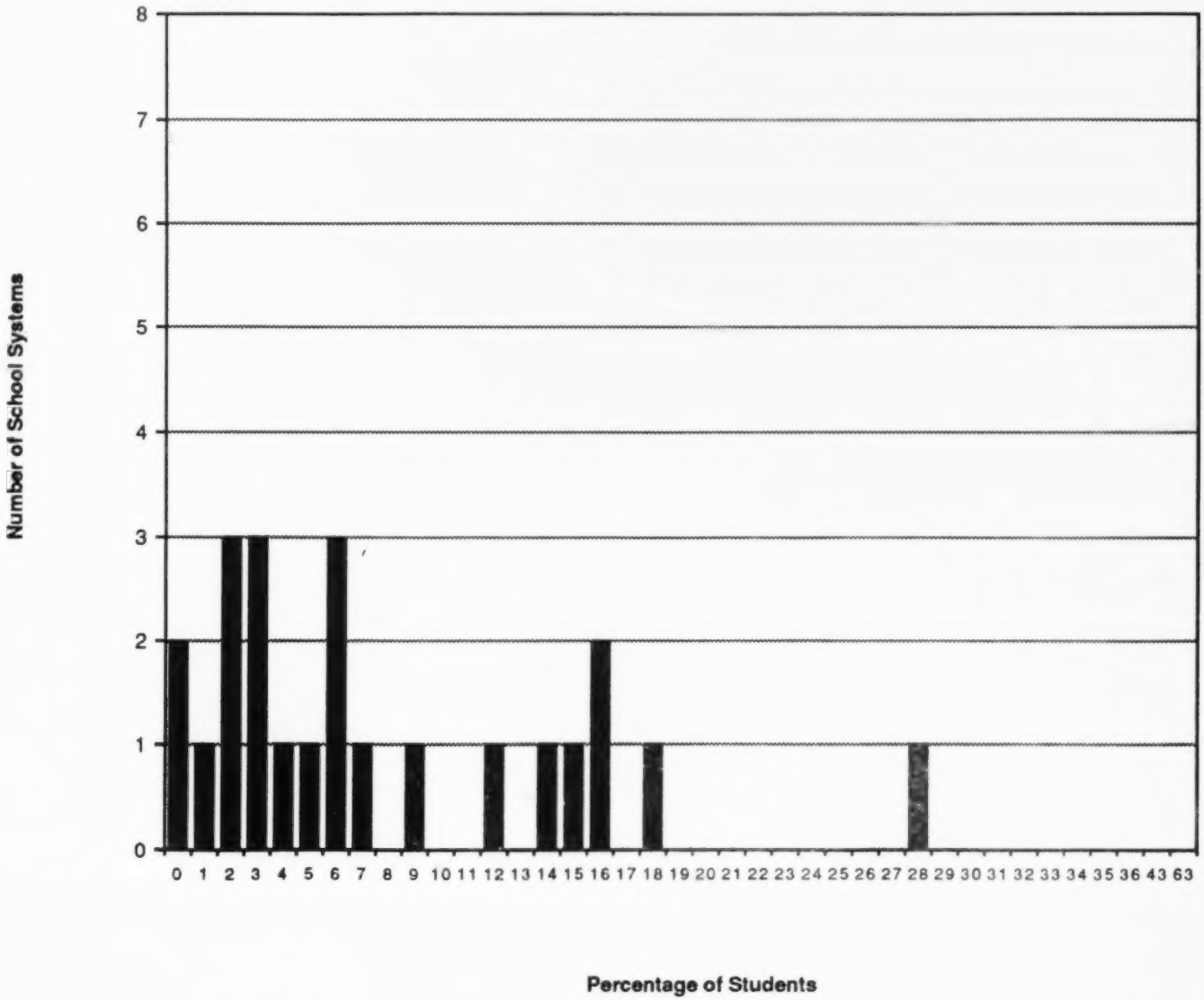

TABLE 10

GRADE 9 RETENTION RATES

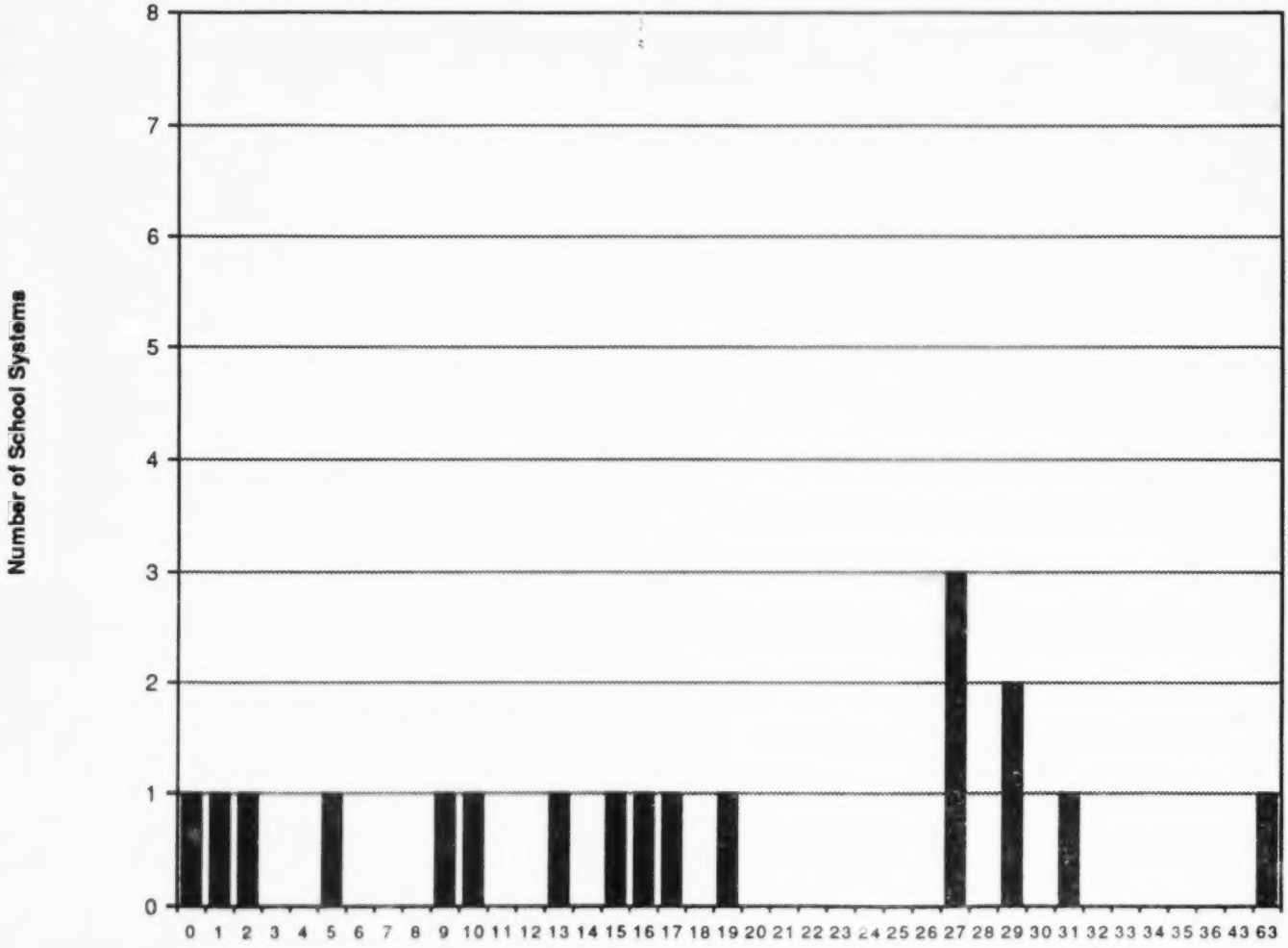

TABLE 11

GRADE 10 RETENTION RATES

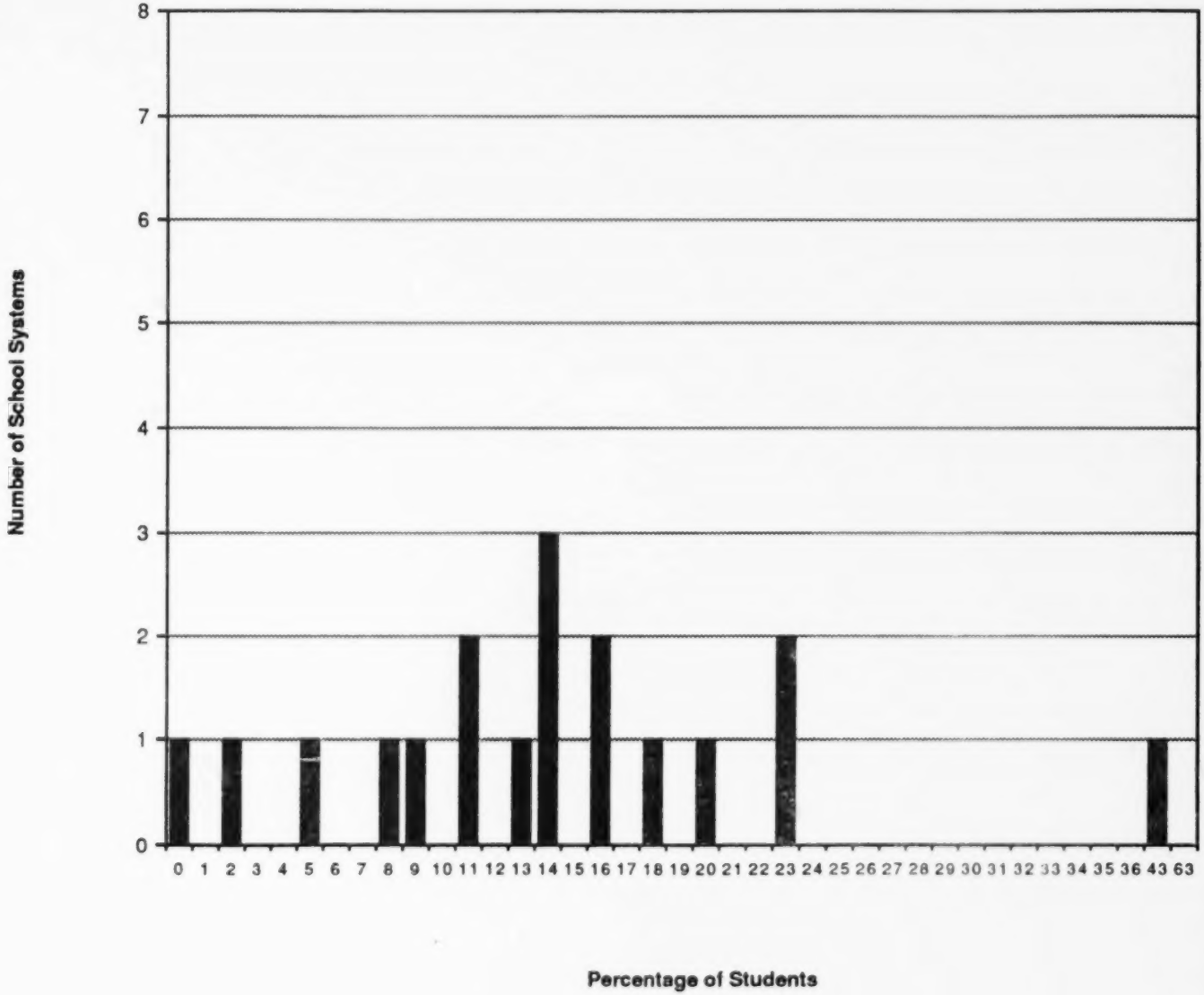

TABLE 12

GRADE 11 RETENTION RATES

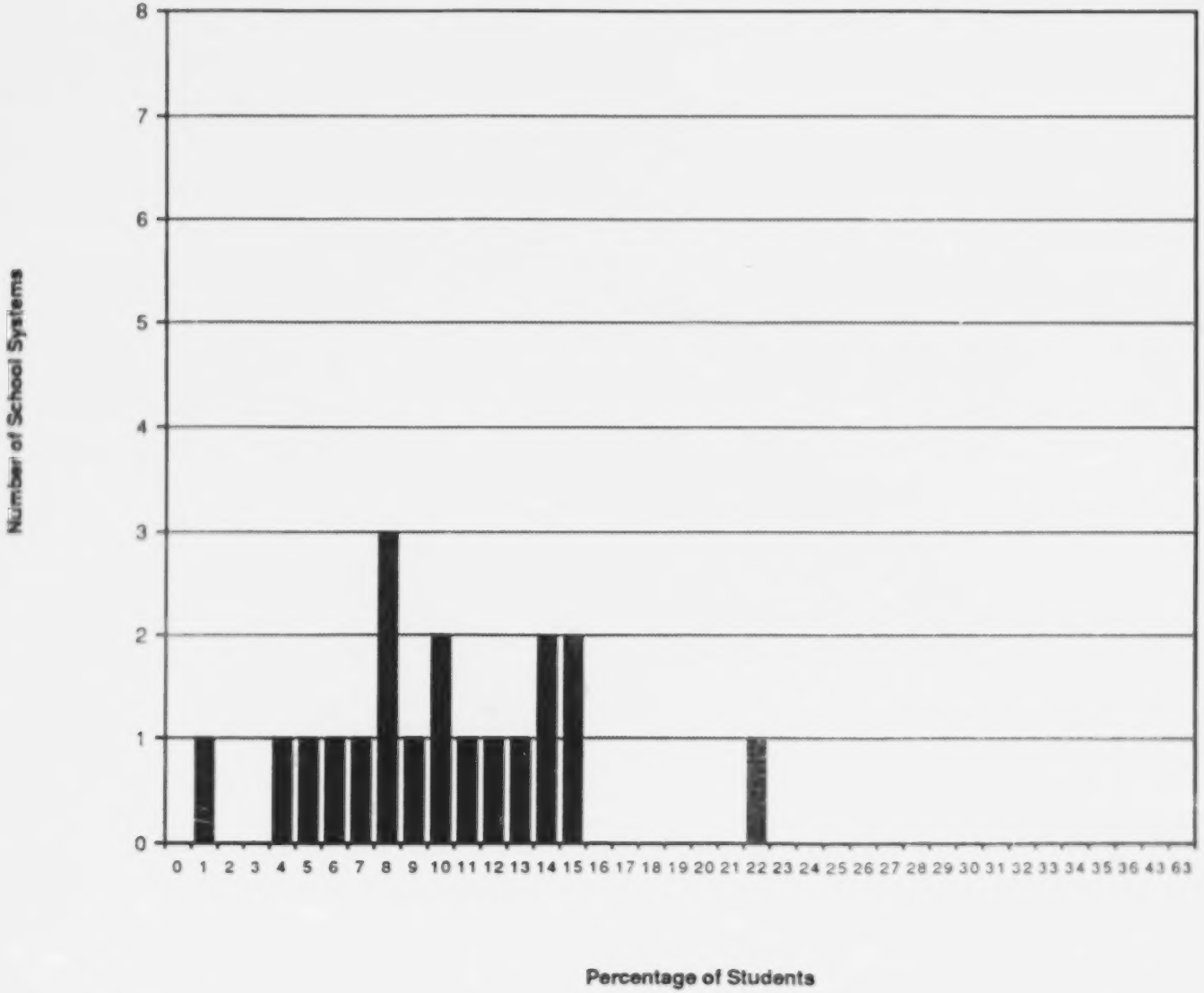

TABLE 13

GRADE 12 RETENTION RATES